

Editorial

Acequias need action, not talk

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Talk is cheap when it comes to preserving Taos Valley acequias.

Town of Taos officials put out a call for help cleaning out the Acequia Madre del Rio Pueblo, which runs through the heart of the town. Only about a dozen people showed up Saturday (April 1) to do the hard manual work of cutting branches, picking up trash and clearing brush out of the ditch so water could flow.

Other irrigation ditches that snake through the valley, bringing the lifeblood liquid to fields, orchards and gardens, are having similar issues. *Parciantes* are aging.

Fewer *parciantes* are stepping up to help maintain the acequias.

These acequias, many dug more than two centuries ago by horse teams and hand tools at a beautiful slope that moves water by gravity to each *parciantes*, are a cultural and agricultural treasure. The commissions and *parciantes* that have the water rights from these ditches form a time-tested social structure for handling water sharing and shortages – even though people aren't always happy with the results.

The lack of hands to keep the ditches clean has been compounded over the last 20 years by development. Elderly *parciantes* become unable to take care of the acequia and younger members of the family have moved away. Irrigated land is sold and sometimes the people who buy it stop using the water out of the acequia. Worse, the new landowners sometimes build across or cover the ditch, affecting the rest of the *parciantes* downstream.

In New Mexico, the water law of the land is use it or lose it. Many of the *parciantes* are watching their acequias wither and it is possible that one day, the delightful sound of water running down the ditches through town and the villages around the valley will fall silent.

We urge people who live in the Taos Valley, whether you have water rights or not, to find out about the acequias in your neighborhood. A good place to start is the Taos Valley Acequia Association, which has a list of ditches and mayordomos.